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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the changing concept of the American family, identifying four major trends in family structure: (1) a dramatic increase in two-wage-earner families; (2) more working women; (3) more single-parent families; and (4) restructuring of families through divorces and remarriages. The family has been losing many of its traditional functions, such as education, socialization, and recreation, to other societal organizations. With changing structure and functions, the family has been experiencing problems resulting from societal changes and also from normal life cycle transitions. Families have been seeking counseling, therapy, and other help. Counselors are encouraged to respond to the problems and changing needs of today's families by studying these phenomena more closely and considering ways to strengthen support systems. It is suggested that attention should be given to recognizing problem sources and assessing methods of resolving problems sooner or preventing them altogether. A brief bibliography is included. (DST)

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November 25, 1983

TODAY'S CHANGING FAMILIES AND THEIR NEEDS

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The New Concept of the Family

Family Structure

In the 1960s and 1970s, family researchers distinguished between the nuclear family and the extended family. The nuclear family was defined as "a social structure consisting of husband, wife, and children. It can also consist of one parent and a child or a brother and a sister . . . any two persons who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption and who share a common residence." The extended family consisted of nuclear family groupings related by blood, marriage, or adoption, who shared a common residence (Eshleman, 1969, p. 22).

Nearly all family counselors, sociologist, and psychologists will agree that the American Family has changed. However, many common beliefs about contemporary family structure are misleading. Howe (1972, pp. 11-12) defines a common misconception of the family as a "white, middle-class, monogamous, father-at-work, mother-and-children-at-home family living in a suburban one-family house." She refutes this popular image by stating that "the definition effectively excludes more than half the population. . . . Yet it remains the standard conception of what the American family is, the model against which all who live differently are still judged deviant."

Young (1982) agrees that the image presented above is mythical. She believes that the average family has two parents, both of whom work, and an average of three children who are expected "to grow up in a hurry" in order to become less dependent.

There appear to be four major trends in the changing structure of the family:

1) Two wage-earner families are becoming increasingly popular. "In March of 1980, more than half of all two-parent families with children contained two working parents. Clearly, the two-parent, two-wage-earner family has emerged as the dominant family type" (Kahn & Kamerman, 1982, p. 13).

2) In both two-parent and single-parent families, more women are working. "Women are increasingly likely to be combining employment and family life, and the popularity of this life style is likely to increase during the 1980s. . . . For the first time in our history, more than half the children under 18 have working mothers, regardless of whether they live with a sole parent or two parents" (Kahn & Kamerman, 1982, p. 13).

3) More and more single-parent families are emerging, especially headed by women. "One American family in ten is now headed by a woman," reports Sheehy (1972, p. 56). "On the national level, total families increased by 14 percent in the last decade, while female-headed families multiplied by 24 percent." Kahn and Kamerman (1982, p. 12) estimate that about

11 million children--almost 20 percent--live in one-parent families.

4) Large numbers of divorces and remarriages are responsible for restructuring of families. "If the current level of divorce continues on a lifetime basis, the likelihood is that 40 percent of those now marrying will subsequently divorce. . . . The number of children involved in divorce has tripled over the last two decades." Studies in 1975 show average time between divorce and remarriage was a little more than three years (Kahn & Kamerman, 1982, pp. 12-13).

Family Functions

Besides changes in family structure, the American family has increasingly been losing its traditional functions. Before industrialization and urbanization, the family often provided all the basic functions necessary to survival, including:

- production of food, clothing, furniture
- protection of members from harm; providing security during illness or injury
- education and religious training
- recreational activities such as group singing, parties
- membership in the surrounding community by virture of family status.

Few, if any, of the above functions are currently provided by the family. Economic, social, governmental, and educational organizations have taken on these roles. Parsons suggests that only two basic functions remain to be filled by the family:

the socialization of the child, and the emotional support and affection that is exchanged among its members. These two functions should be performed better because the loss of other functions frees the family to concentrate on those that remain (summarized by Rodman, 1965). However, if only two family functions remain, we might consider that divorce may seem like a logical solution for a particular family if those two functions have broken down.

Not all family researchers feel that only two functions remain for the family to provide. However, most agree that the more concrete operations have been assumed by other specialized organizations, and that remaining family functions are less concrete in nature. "The family is the haven for intimacy, emotional support, interpersonal fulfillment, expression of mutually developed values, and achievement of personal satisfactions" (Kahn & Kamerman, 1982, p. 228).

Family Importance

Considering restructuring of traditional family models and the loss of functions previously performed by the family, we may wonder "How important are families and will they survive?"

Information collected from one study shows that the family is considered of highest importance: 55 percent of Americans polled named "a happy marriage" and 36 percent named "a good family life" when asked to identify the two domains most important to them. These two selections surpassed by far such alternatives

as good government, good friends, one's house, an interesting job, the city, or even religion (Kropotkin, 1972).

In other studies, 78 percent of Americans indicated that the family is the most meaningful part of life, compared to 9 percent who felt that way about work or leisure. "Most Americans remain deeply committed to the idea and ideal of the family as an institution" (Katz, 1977). P. Cole (1982) feels that families will not disappear; "they are human nature, a nice place to be." Yorburg (1973, p. 200) indicates that marriage will persist because "it can compensate in the security of deep and lasting emotional response for what it lacks in perpetual excitement."

Breakdown of Family Support Systems

Support systems are personal connections with other people and families that provide listening, sharing, helping, recreational, and other opportunities. In the past, extended families usually provided a strong and complex support system for members of the family. If one family member had a problem, he or she could choose among many other family members to ask for advice or help. Support systems also existed informally in communities which tended to be smaller and more personal than communities in today's world. Neighbors knew each other by name and often attended the same church and/or school functions. Small general stores and other services such as barbers and physicians provided an opportunity for people to gather and converse. Neighborhood "koffee "klatches" were common methods of sharing problems and offering advice.

With the advent of a fast-paced, industrial society, Americans no longer tended to stay in the same communities for their lifetime. Many business, educational, and other opportunities spurred nuclear families to move to new locations, often unaccompanied by kin.

Today, mobility is more common than stability. Extended families no longer tend to live in the same house--often not even in the same state. Continued expansion of business and industry has promoted an increasingly mobile lifestyle. Families often move several or more times during their lifetime, and every move requires discovering new network support systems within a new community.

Bronfenbrenner (1972) summarizes the role of progress in decreasing opportunity and incentive for meaningful contact between people of varying ages by

> fragmentation of the extended family, the separation of residential and business areas, the disappearance of neighborhoods, the elimination of small stores in favor of supermarkets, zoning ordinances, occupational mobility, child-labor laws, the abolishment of the apprentice system, consolidated schools, television, telephones, the substitution of the automobile for public transportation or just plain walking, separate patterns of social life for different age groups, the working mother, the delegation of child care to specialists.

Other Influences on the Family

The changing attitudes of society both influence and are influenced by family change. Availability of alternate

lifestyles, increased sexual permissiveness, women's changing values, lessened sanctions against singlehood, and the gay liberation front have all contributed to new patterns of relationships. J. Cole (1982) indicates there are no "shoulds" regarding families today. There are different styles of successful relationships and less clear role definitions. Open marriages and male-female equalization are two popular trends. Another statistical trend "appears to be for young, college-educated women to delay getting married until they are closer to twenty-five or older (perhaps living with their potential mate and others first) and . . . to want smaller families than did their prolific 1950s' counterparts" (Howe, 1972, p. 18).

Values play a large role in the formation and restructuring of families. Scanzoni (1965) suggests that common values existing between husband and wife were greatly influenced by extended kin's control over mate selection at the turn of the century. Scanzoni feels that mutual involvement in external networks increases the likelihood of common values between marital partners, and decreases the likelihood of separation and divorce. "Middle-class families, who tend to experience fewer divorces, maintain extensive 'quasi-kin' networks along with blood kin relations. . . . To the extent that the couple is mutually integrated into these external networks, it will share common values and norms, hence resolve conflict by means other than dissolution."

Changing values regarding women's roles have influenced the family in many ways. P. Cole (1982) suggests that modernization of family work functions and household chores has caused less help to be required from children and women. Household modernization has contributed to a lack of esteem regarding household functions, thus precipitating the Women's Movement. The Women's Movement, in turn, further influences the family and family roles.

Kearney (1979, p. 16) describes the Women's Movement as "providing feminist challenges to common assumptions about the 'proper' role of women." She notes that early feminist objectives emphasized social structural changes rather than change in sex roles on an interpersonal level. Kearney emphasizes that today feminist goals are integrally related to choices regarding parenting, sex roles, and "options for achieving a meaningful life."

Brunk (1982) sums up the role of societal influences upon the family in this way:

> The changing family is not necessarily changing only in structure, but in society's impact on it, role of institutions, etc. [For example] divorce came about because of society's permission. There are a lot of pressures on families: economic, unemployment, both parents working, one parent gone for long periods of time, no biological families nearby. [Also] the family is not the primary influence on kids anymore, but rather television and peers.

Family Needs and Problems

Reasons for seeking counseling and other help

Normal family needs and concerns can be classified under two broad categories: those resulting from societal changes and those resulting from normal life cycle and transitional problems. Unemployment and struggle to maintain a stable family economy are likely to be direct effects of a changing society. Kahn and Kamerman (1982, p. 299) feel that such problems resulting from societal changes are perceived as personal problems. "On the level of daily experience, people do not necessarily connect what they are going through with broader trends and societal change. They identify needs and problems." Normal life cycle and transitional problems include changes in family structure (divorce, remarriage, adoption), family composition (the birth of a first child, the move of an elderly woman to live with a married daughter), or family roles (wife entering labor force, joining of wife and husband in a family business). Kahn and Kamerman describe the perception of a problem as

> a source of mild discomfort, or severe stress, or overwhelming anguish. It may arise out of severe pathology or from ordinary, "routine" experience. It may be defined as a "family" problem, as a problem of the parent(s), or as a problem for, or created by, one particular member.

Yorburg (1973, p. 196) believes that nuclear family troubles generate from their inability to provide certain services performed in the past by the extended family. She feels that major

problems are provision for health, education, and welfare, particularly for the youth and the aged; intense parent-child relationships and loneliness of nuclear family units; and role conflicts stemming from discontinuities between expectations and actual demands.

Brunk (1982) feels that families seek counseling because someone with more power tells them to (referrals from schools, employment, social or government agencies) or because they are hurting and uncomfortable and want relief from pain (self-referrals). Schools become sources of referrals when children "do something that is bad enough for others to notice."

Kahn and Kamerman (1982, p. 75) also believe personal pain is a prominent reason why families seek counseling and therapy. "They are coming because they have a problem--a dysfunctional condition--and it is causing them pain. They are seeking help because they think their problem or condition is serious enough to warrant serious and perhaps sustained treatment." Kahn and Kamerman recognize that agencies, schools, courts, and sometimes physicians and ministers refer people for help, but feel that the actual request usually originates by the person needing or wanting help. They also recognize that women are by far the majority of people who take the initiative in seeking help for themselves and their families.

Some family problems are significantly related to normal life roles and life transitions, such as marital problems and

divorce, children and parenting problems, and problems specific to working women and one-parent families. "Between their mid-twenties and early fifties, adults are likely to marry, have their children, experience divorce, remarry, be stepparents, and see their youngest child leave home. And all these occur during those years when labor force participation rates for adults are at their peak (ages 25-54)" (Kahn & Kamerman, 1982, p. 15).

Another major group of problems is related to membership in special groups, such as teenagers, teen parents, the aged, Blacks and ethnic families, and poor families.

Marital problems and divorce

In his 1965 Reinquiry into Marital Disorganization, Scanzoni defines conflct as dissensus between marital partners over values, beliefs, goals, norms, and behaviors. Conflict is inherent in any social system. In marriage, it can be resolved by 1) dissolution of the marriage, 2) a change of orientation on the part of one or both spouses, or 3) institutionalization--conflict becomes an accepted part of the system. Goode (1962) proposed that marital conflicts will result in actual divorce proceedings depending on the extent to which divorce itself is easy, that is, costs very little. Where divorce costs little there will be a high divorce rate, whereas if divorce is difficult and costly, divorce will be primarily an upper-class privilege. This view is confirmed by Brunk (1982), who believes that today society "gives permission" to divorce.

"The phenomenon of divorce is receiving increasing attention as a stress-inducing life crisis that affects over two million adults and one million children annually" (Berman & Turk, 1981). Studies in the late 70s show that divorced people tend to encounter three major categories of problems: pragmatic concerns, interpersonal and social problems, and family-related stresses. Berman and Turk's study showed that family related problems were actually two distinct sets of problems: interactions with the children and interactions with the former spouse. Life satisfaction for divorced persons was also influenced greatly by practical problems in daily living (including finding the time to accomplish everything), financial difficulties, and difficulties with peers and social relations.

In a survey of 150 women divorcees, most claimed marriage breakdown had affected their health. Eighty percent discussed at least four symptoms of stress, including crying, weight gain or loss, and sleeping difficulties. The most common complaints were nervous tension and depression. Symptoms were worst just before separation. The survey also revealed that divorcees still feel themselves to be an outsider group. Divorced women are assumed to be sexually available to husbands and a threat to wives (Chester, Hull University).

<u>One-parent families</u>

People involved in family breakdown have many unique problems. But it is being recognized that they also share problems in common with other groups, particularly widows and

widowers, unmarried mothers, and their children (White, 1973).

"The single-parent family is the fastest growing family form in America. Since 1960, the proportion of female-headed families in the United States has doubled and at present these families are growing at a rate that is two and a half times as fast as that of husband and wife families" (Ross & Sawhill, 1975).

Eshleman (1969) defines four structural characteristics of one-parent families and their consequences. The task structure provides for the physical, emotional, and social needs of all the family members. This constitutes both breadwinning and household duties. Problems develop in the one-parent family because there is usually little time or energy left over to perform household tasks when working full time. Choices are not always appealing: hiring household help at considerable cost or overloading children or parent. Complicating the lack of time and energy is the fact that women--who head the majority of one-parent families--often receive lower pay in comparison to men who are in the same positions (Brunk, 1982).

Eshleman's second structure is communication. He suggests that parents are channels of communication between the adult world and the child's world, transmitting value systems and representing the child in the adult world. Loss of a parent of one sex distorts a child's communication and understanding of self-image, social skills, and an image of the total society. The single parent is limited in the social activities and loses her own normal channels of communication.

The power structure is also changed when a family loses a parent. The remaining parent becomes the only power figure in the family and is, consequently, in any given situation, either for or against the child.

Regarding the affectional structure, Eshleman indicates that both adults and children require love and security in order to maintain emotional stability, develop in a healthy manner, and meet the stresses and demands of life. The remaining parent of a one-parent family needs love, emotional support and an outlet for negative feelings. Eshleman feels that parents provide these attributes to children, but do not receive the same amount of support in return. Thus in many cases, the remaining parent no longer meets her needs within the family structure. The combined needs of the children may be intolerable to the emotionally unsupported solitary parent.

J. Cole (1982) reports that many of the problems single parents deal with are in regard to social activities. Many single parents play a martyr role (by giving all of their time and energy to their family) and feel guilty when they seek adult companionship. Another important aspect of single-parenting that often becomes a problem is the financial burden of supporting a family.

Stepfamilies are another group today with specific needs and problems. Nearly three quarters of the people who get divorced each year eventually remarry (White, 1973). Finesmith (1982)

feels that stepfamilies have nowhere special to go for help regarding their own unique problems.

Children and Parenting

One of the main roles found in families is parenting. The word "parenting" carries many conotations, from loving, supporting, and nurturing, to a physical providing of necessities. As pointed out earlier, the family of the past was totally responsible for meeting all the needs of its children--physical, health, social, educational, emotional, recreational. Many of those functions are currently being met by other avenues today, such as schools, medical establishments, churches, peers, television, and other organizations and methods. However, we still assume today that the primary responsibility for fulfilling children's needs belongs to families. Bronfenbrenner states that our society has been so busy fulfilling other needs that we have forgotten to pay attention to our children. "Our society expects its citizens first of all to meet the demands of their jobs, and then to fulfill civic and social obligations. Responsibilities to children are to be met, of course, but this is something one is expected to do in his spare time" (1972, p. 141). Bronfenbrenner feels that this mixing of priorities has caused "trouble so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of our nation. The source of the trouble is nothing less than a national neglect of children, and of those primarily engaged in their care: America's parents" (p. 139).

Kahn and Kamerman divide parenting problems into two groups: problems of children themselves, and problem behavior of parents in relation to children, particularly child abuse (1982, p. 22). Children's problems are sometimes (perhaps often) symptomatic of underlying family problems. Often a child's problem will be a stimulus for the whole family to seek counseling or other help.

Child neglect and child abuse have been the most reported problem behaviors of parents. Ruger and Wooten (1982) have identified common experiences and characteristics of parents who have a high risk of child-abuse:

1) discontinuity in relationships (coming from homes in which needs could not be met by others)

2) powerlessness and low self-esteem (lack of confidence in ability to parent)

3) history repeats (they themselves have been child-abuse victims)

4) self-destructiveness (self-abuse such as chemical dependency, neglect of health, poor mate selection, failure to achieve)

5) loneliness and isolation (a lifetime of emotional loneliness)

6) ambivalence (things are either good or bad, black or white).

Today's society does not always foster and support the parenting role. One reason for this is the increased attention on fulfilling personal needs; for example, more women are choosing to follow career paths and place less emphasis on the family. Whether by choice or not, many more women are working today than previously. Another reason may be that many people feel parenting skills come naturally. But with the breakdown

of support systems and less contact with the extended family, few new parents have had many--or any--role models regarding childrearing.

Brunk (1982) described parenting as "the only job you sign up for for 18 years, without pay, no leave, and you are supposed to do it perfectly at all times." She said that today is a difficult time to be a family, because there are huge societal conflicts. For example, "we've come to the point where children are valued in our society enough to write books about them, but at the same time 85 percent of parents in the United States use physical restraint as a primary form of discipline." Brunk feels that some parents have abdicated their responsibilities toward their children. "It became popular a few years ago to be permissive, to throw off puritanical and biblical roots in childrearing . . . and like everything else, we did it in a big way. It's just as abusive to not make limits for your children as it is to make too many of them." Brunk feels that society doesn't place a very high value on being a parent or give out information about parenting.

Both Bronfenbrenner and Brunk feel that other influences on the family today create new problems and tensions as well as taking attention away from the family unit. One example is television, which Bronfenbrenner blasts in descriptive style:

> Like the sorcerer of old, the television set casts its magic spell, freezing speech and action, turning the living into silent statues so long as the enchantment lasts. The primary danger of the television screen lies not so much in the behavior it produces--although there is danger there--as in the behavior it prevents: the talks,

> the games, the family festivities and arguments through which much of the child's learning takes place and through which his character is formed. Turning on the television set can turn off the process that transforms children into people (1972, p. 142).

Special Groups

Although there are general problems that any family may experience, there are special groups that are more likely to experience certain kinds of problems.

Teens often have unique feelings and situations. Some problems perceived by teens are natural "growing pains" experienced in the process of establishing an identity and becoming an adult. Even normal stresses can alienate teens from their families or from society. This is complicated when the parents do not understand the urgency or perceived importance that the teen experiences. Young (1982) feels that parents don't know how to deal with teenagers. The average teen is a loner, she feels. Both wed and un-wed teens who become parents have to deal with two sets of problems: normal growth experiences, including identity establishment; and all the real and perceived problems of parenting and life support.

Blacks are an important group today who experience particular problems in dealing with a society that is predominantly white. When differences in religion, income, education, region of the country, and family heritage are ignored, statistics suggest that Blacks have a greater frequency of broken marriages, more female-headed families, a larger number of births out of wedlock,

a greater dependence on public assistance, higher unemployment rates, lower wages, and larger families than do their white counterparts (Eshleman, 1969, p. 202). Herzog (1965) suggests that many of these characteristics are influenced far more by differences in income than differences in color. However, it is important to ask what roles deprivation and discrimination may play. Gwyn and Kilpatrick (1981) have shown that in a therapeutic study, race was the most significant variable in determining if a client was given the opportunity to see a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker. In thisstudy, over half of the black clients failed to return for therapy after the first session. Another study indicates that counselors have stereotyped Blacks as culturally disadvantaged, and as having weak family structures and negative self-concepts (Smith, 1977). Gwyn and Kilpatrick suggest that the high dropout trend among Black families may be caused by the fact that "the majority of psychological and therapeutic theorists are not black and have not been a part of black communities, nor have they understood the many components of the black cultural experience" (Gwyn & Kilpatrick citing McAdoo, 1977).

Other ethnic minorities may have a lot in common with problems experienced by Blacks. Poor families share many characteristics, including types of problems and ways of looking for solutions.

Lower-income families tend to have concrete, often environmental, problems such as unemployment, housing, childcare, welfare benefits, and financial crises. "Poverty, with its

concomitant feelings of powerlessness and a sense of lack of control over one's life, disrupts social organization and makes the family structure especially vulnerable to dysfunction" (Friedman & Friedman, 1982). Crises are often related to the basic necessities of life. Problems such as addiction, alcoholism, divorce, wife and child abuse, and suicide are not uncommon. However, the groups identified as having the highest rates of problems are the least likely to identify such problems as needing outside help. "Both men and women in low income, education, and occupational groups more often adopt a self-help position--reporting that they would not want to go someplace for help--than do those in higher social groups" (Kahn & Kamerman, 1982, p. 26).

The aged are another group of people in today's society with special needs. As science continues to expand and explore the health and nutrition fields, larger numbers of people are living to older ages. Whether the aged live with relatives, by themselves, or in groups or homes for the aged, they often require assistance meeting their needs. Tibbitts (1965) points out two variables regarding the relationship of the aged and their children: families are smaller (which means that there are fewer children to look after the parents in their old age), and both parents and children prefer to live separately (due to society's high value of self-sufficiency and independence). Tibbetts and Getzel (1981) recognize that the aged often have relationships with kin, friends, and neighbors who provide support services.

Summary and Implications for Counselors

Most psychologists, sociologists, and family counselors will agree that the American family has changed. Four major trends in family structure are 1) dramatic increase of two-wage-earner families, 2) more working women, 3) more single-parent families, and 4) restructuring of families through divorces and remarriages. The family is losing many of its traditional functions--such as education, socialization, recreation--to other societal organizations and methods. Traditional support systems have also broken down as mobility increases and progress and specialization continue to expand. New attitudes and values are influencing the concept of the family. Yet most Americans continue to highly value family life.

With changing structure and functions, the family is experiencing problems resulting from societal changes and also from normal life cycle transitions. Families seek counseling and help through referrals or through their own personal pain. Particular sets of problems occur to divorced persons, one-parent families, and stepfamilies. Parenting problems are noticeable, perhaps because more women are juggling jobs and homes, or because of other societal influences. Special family groups, in particular teens, the aged, Blacks and other ethnic minorities, and poor families, have special needs and may require new helping/counseling methods and attitudes.

Today's counselors must respond to the changing needs of today's families. If changing structure and functions are increasing family problems, perhaps we need to study these phenomena more closely and consider ways to strengthen helpful aspects, such as support systems. Greater sensitivity to, and new ways of communication, are needed to more fully reach special subgroups of our society. New attention should be given to recognizing problem sources and assessing methods of reaching problems sooner, or preventing them altogether.

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